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E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/21/2017

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: SYRIAN OPPOSITION LEADER HAS CANCER, DESCRIBES  
PROGRESS ON NATIONAL CONGRESS

Classified By: A/DCM William Roebuck for reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) Summary: Leading opposition activist Riad Seif told Emboff that he was making quiet progress on expanding the small Damascus Declaration group into a 180-member National Congress. Separately, he confirmed that he has been diagnosed with prostate cancer and hopes to get permission for treatment in Germany. End Summary.

¶2. (C) EXPANDING DAMASCUS DECLARATION GROUP: Prominent Syrian opposition leader Riad Seif told Emboff June 20 that the 34-member Damascus Declaration (DD) group had agreed at a June 16 meeting to expand into a National Congress comprised of up to 180 members in two or three months. Between now and then, prospective candidates for the Congress will meet secretly in small groups to discuss important issues and

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forge stronger bonds between one and another, according to Seif. Candidates for the National Congress represent a broad cross-section of Syrian society, including moderate Islamists, but share common liberal democratic beliefs, Seif said. Echoing comments made in the past, Seif said that by expanding the DD group into the Congress it would dilute the power of Arab nationalist DD members who tend to be critical of the West (and especially the U.S.). Seif expressed his conviction that the step toward the National Congress was a historic step toward strengthening the internal opposition and laying the groundwork for democratic reforms in Syria.

¶3. (C) HEALTH CONCERNS: Separately, Seif noted that he planned to meet June 21 with Syrian Vice President Dr. Najah al-Attar to request permission to leave Syria for treatment of his recently diagnosed prostate cancer. At that meeting, he would present Attar a report in which a local German-trained Syrian specialist described the cancer as being in the second phase and requiring treatment outside Syria. (Note: Seif is currently prohibited from international travel because of a seven-year "rights ban" following his April 2002 conviction and sentencing for "trying to change the constitution by illegal means." End Note.) Seif expressed hope that Attar would permit him to travel to Germany, where he would seek treatment for both his cancer and for a long-standing heart condition.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: While the expansion of the DD group into a National Congress would significantly broaden the internal opposition, Seif seems overly optimistic about the ability of group members to function under the radar of Syrian security services. And while we cannot judge whether the regime will allow Seif to travel, it has not been sympathetic in the past

to medical emergencies of other opposition members such as Alawite regime critic Aref Dalila who continues to serve out his 10-year sentence despite serious health problems.

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